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WISCONSIN NATURAL RESOURCES

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Memories of the Grey Dawn Club

A hunting shack story paints a picture of a time and the place.

by

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Our old gun club was located along the Des Plaines River adjacent to a huge, lush area of marshes and wetlands. The area was within reach of Milwaukee, Kenosha and Chicago, but not widely used in those days.

The river flowed through three townships of Kenosha County on a flyway for migrating waterfowl following the Lake Michigan coast. Williams and Holt's sloughs were important resting and feeding sites for the birds. Several bayous were a haven for greenwing and bluewing teal, mallards, shovelers, pintails and wood ducks as well as shorebirds.

In the summer of 1935, a group of Simmons Company sportsmen and two city fireman organized the Grey Dawn Gun Club. The club site was on the western edge of the marsh. Membership originally consisted of ten seasoned sportsmen. Dues were \$7 -- it was still Depression days.

We leased about 160 acres of marsh and woods from the Lee Benedict family for \$50 per year. By luck one member found a small abandoned house. After scraping up funds, we purchased the building for \$90, demolished it, trucked the lumber to the site and built a club house. It was definitely a do-it-yourself project, consisting of a large general room, small kitchen and one bedroom with four bunks.

We called it "The Shack," but to me it was a mansion. The kitchen was furnished with a kerosene stove, the general room with used chairs and a table. Our wives furnished the kitchen ware, bedding and other camp necessities. Nearby we built an outhouse. It had a rough seat and we called it the Sliver Room.

Just north of the Shack we discovered a flowing spring. A tile was placed over the bubbling water and the bottom was filled with clean sand. There was always fresh water for coffee and cooking in summer and winter.

Carl Anderson, club president, was handy with the carpenter tools and supervised construction. Lawrence Jensen was the cook. During the summer we had family picnics, trap shoots, built wood duck houses and placed them in good marsh locations. In the fall and winter Charlie Voigt, Ed Nelson and Chas James tended a trap line collecting muskrat, mink, skunk and fox.

My partner, Chris Radats, used to spend mid-summer searching for raspberries and blackberries. During fall, we collected hickory and hazelnuts. We often searched the woods for mushrooms; the prize find we called "the cauliflower." Jensen would slice the mushrooms, place them in egg batter and fry them like a pancake. Boy, were they tasty.

We often gathered on weekends during December, January and February to build spike and canister feeders for wintering pheasants, Hungarian partridge and other wildlife. On our return to the Shack after a cold round of filling the feeders, Jensen had the iron kettle cooking with oxtail soup. Sometimes he would toss a cut-up rabbit or squirrel into the pot with a large piece of Italian bread -- what a welcome meal.

Those really were the days of camaraderie: tall stories, hot poker and cribbage games filled out a cold afternoon.

Beginning in early September, we prepared for the duck hunting season. The group worked together to build five blinds in strategic locations. Two members were assigned to each blind by drawing numbers, but we often rotated blinds to get some challenging shooting.

Blinds were constructed with chicken wire, laced with cattails, willow and marsh grass. Each blind had a bench or box to sit on. As we built the blinds, it was a thrill to see hundreds of ducks winging over the marsh. Many of the ducks nested and hatched in nearby Holt's slough.

On opening day, we gathered at the Shack about 4:00 a.m. for bacon and eggs. Dressed in khaki hunting clothes and hip boots, we headed off to the blinds for the day's shoot.

We always took two boxes of shells as it was tricky shooting at swift passing flights. At the opening time, we followed a strict code to make sure the ducks were in shooting range. During midweek Nelson and James occupied the best blinds, but on weekends the rest of the members filled their assigned blinds. Voigt had a small skiff to punt some shooters to their blinds across the Des Plaines River.

The first two or three weekends offered great shooting, mostly for local ducks. In the bag were teal, mallards, shovelers, pintail, widgeon and the odd coot. On occasions I would take a few jacksnipe and woodcock along the river's wooded areas. In late October and early November, the northern flight winged down the river's flyway.

In the shallow openings where muskrats built their lodges, I would set out a string of mallard decoys I had made from white cedar posts. From my blind, using an Olt call, I could give the ducks a feeding call or a highball, and at times lure a flock within shooting range.

Some weekends we shot our limit of ten ducks each by 9 a.m. Some members shot only greenheads and five or six satisfied them. After a successful duck hunt we often pooled our mallards and the cook would put on a game feed with wild rice, sweet potatoes and liquid refreshments.

During the second and third week of November, flights of canvasbacks and redheads would wing down the river. On a frosty morning, it was worth the cold wait to get a shot at a few of these prize birds. In those days there were few flights of Canada geese. But just south of the Shack in a river bayou we called the Goose Pond, Canadas would gather during the spring migration.

In the '40s, several members were assigned positions in other cities, some were assigned to the war effort and still others passed away. There was no time to hunt or to fund the camp, so we disbanded. I still kept my interest in waterfowl, and upon noticing how much farmland and marshes were being drained, I joined Ducks Unlimited.

The property was sold and became a Girl Scout camp. Many changes took place; the Shack burned to the ground. The property was sold again and is now a sporting clays operation.

Duck flights still wing over that marsh and river each fall and spring. Time marches on, and I am the last living member of the Grey Dawn Gun Club. Occasionally I visit the property to observe the considerably smaller duck migrations. Geese now outnumber the ducks due to habitat loss, but I am pleased with the progress DU and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources have made in restoring the marshes and wetlands.

Still, I can't visit the old place without recalling the great duck shooting days, old friends and good fellowship we enjoyed at the Shack.

About the author

Phil H. Sander writes from Kenosha.

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